

# Tribes TLC®...Building Communities of Learners

## ***What if....***

*...we created a safe and caring environment in our school?*

*...everyone respected individual differences and the diversity of our cultures?*

*...our teachers designed learning experiences to reach students who learn in different ways?*

*...students became responsible for themselves and each other?*

*...we knew how to educate all of our students for success in the 21st century?*

*...our families became more actively involved in the education of their children?*

*...we could awaken a love of learning in everyone?*

Tribes is not a curriculum. It is a democratic group process that develops inclusion (caring and support), influence (a sense of value - meaningful participation) and community (positive expectations); while teaching twelve collaborative skills which help people work well together. The twelve collaborative skills are: Participating Fully, Listening Attentively, Expressing Appreciation, Reflecting on Experience, Valuing Diversity of Culture/Ideas, Thinking Constructively, Making Responsible Decisions, Resolving Conflict, Solving Problems Creatively, Working Together on Tasks, Assessing Improvement and Celebrating Achievement. Academic material is taught through cooperative learning strategies and multiple ways to reach students of different learning styles. Teachers, administrators, and staff as well as parents in a Tribes School also work together in collaborative groups. They, too, enjoy a sense of community that encourages their creativity.

Students achieve because they

- feel included and appreciated by peers and teachers
- are respected no matter their different abilities, culture, gender, interests or dreams
- are actively involved in their own learning
- have positive expectations from others that they will be successful.

Precursor study results in Beloit, Wisconsin, of phase two of a three phase evaluation study showed that thorough and consistent classroom implementation of the Tribes process and Higher CTBS-5 (Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills -5) reading scores were significantly associated with higher performance on the WRCT (Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Test) for this sample of third grade students. The ses status, minority status and gender status of students were not significantly associated with WRCT performance. The third year Beloit study found that fourth graders from Tribes classrooms where the program was well implemented scored significantly higher on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, than their counterparts from less well-implemented Tribes classrooms. In addition, 59.7 percent of the teachers surveyed reported that they spent less time managing student behavior because of Tribes

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The **Mission** of Tribes is to assure the healthy development of every child so that each has the knowledge, skills, and resiliency to be successful in a rapidly changing world. The **Goal** of a Tribes school is to engage all teachers, administrators, students and families in working together as a learning community dedicated to: caring and support, active participation, positive expectations for all students.

Essential components to ensure a learning environment in which all students feel safe:

1. **Agreements** to ensure safety – in the Tribes process, there are four: Mutual Respect, Attentive Listening, Right to Pass (and Right to fully participate), Appreciations/No Put Downs. These agreements are the foundation for creating an environment that is safe and productive. The important thing is to verbalize with your students the agreements or rules that are necessary for everyone to keep in your classroom. Just saying it won't make it happen but ongoing reminders of the expectations for how we treat each other will help make it a part of the culture. You cannot become a community if there is not an environment of safety and these articulated agreements help ensure that it happens.
2. When possible and practical, have your learners gather in a **circle** – they can be sitting on the floor, standing or sitting on chairs. In Tribes, it is called a community circle – some folks refer to it as class meetings, circle time, etc. The removal of desks/tables provides for a unique opportunity to remove those barriers for developing a greater sense of openness. The very structure says there is no leader and everyone can see each other in the circle. It is a good place for making general announcements and for sharing.
3. Knowing **everyone's name** – this may seem “elementary” but it is sometimes overlooked as students get older. Never assume that everyone knows each other's names- they may know the face but not the name. There are lots of activities to make this fun and you will see an improvement in the group's cohesion if students know each other's names.
4. **Inclusion** – getting to know each other and stating one's own needs. You may think of this as an ice-breaker. They are to be used whenever a new group comes together and whenever it seems appropriate for existing groups. They can be as simple as a sentence starter (i.e. When I am in a group, I need...., When I am not listened to, I feel....., etc.) or they can be more involved (creating a life map and sharing it, telling a story of an important life event, etc.). The choice of the inclusion activity must reflect the level of trust in the group – activities that require greater amounts of trust/risk should not be used until the group has had the opportunity to build that trust – i.e. sharing something you did over the summer is less risky than the sharing of an embarrassing moment, which is less risky than a trust walk.

Whenever possible, the inclusion strategy should connect with the learner's personal experience which connects with your learning objective. For instance, if talking about the civil war, you might start out describing a personal experience with a conflict, when learning about healthy eating you might start out naming fruits or vegetables that you like to eat, etc. This, as you know, is how the brain learns – by making connections.

5. **Energizers** are important for 2 reasons; they are fun and humor is great to build connections because it creates an emotional response and our brain is much more likely to remember something with an emotional connect. In addition, energizers wake up our brain so that we will be more attentive. Energizers can involve moving around – musical chairs, etc. or they can be brain teasers. In general, students need an energizer half way through the morning, after lunch (if they don't have recess – then they need a “settling down activity”) or in mid-afternoon. And you need to have a variety of them ready to use when they are tuning out. They can be as short as a 30 second stretch to a 10 min. activity.
6. **Skill building** – working together is an essential life skill AND it doesn't just happen. Before your learners can be successful in cooperative learning activities, you need to be sure they have the necessary collaborative skills. These include attentive listening, mutual respect, decision making, problem solving, conflict resolution, etc. If the students are not working together well in groups, take a step back and ask yourself which of the agreements is not being followed. Then look at the collaborative skills. Create learning experiences to help students practice these essential skills. *(And just a little reminder, adults need these skills as well – never assume that adults have them. Attentive listening, assertive communication and conflict resolution skills should never be assumed as a given with adults.)*
7. **Ongoing groups** – one important difference between the Tribes process and other cooperative groupings is the establishment of ongoing groups - Tribes. After students have experienced a variety of groupings (pairs, triads, quads, etc.) and show that they understand and honor the agreements, they identify 7 people that they would like to be with in a group. The teacher promises that at least 1 person they name will be in their group. Once these groups are formed (within 3 weeks to 2 months – depending on their ability to work together), they are maintained throughout the semester or school year. Students still work with other groupings as well but they know who their tribe is and they meet regularly. The tribe groupings could be used for social skills or academic projects.
8. **Reflection** is important for knowledge retention – thinking about what I learned and expressing it (writing, drawing, sharing, metaphors, etc.). This is an important critical thinking skill. A reflective environment is created with a wait time before a question is answered. Build in silent reflection time. Reflection can be done in many different ways and at different times (before, during and after a learning activity). Some possible reflection questions could include: pre (what kind of things do I know and what do I want to know), during (what meaning does this information have for me), and post (what did I learn, how can I integrate this with other things, what might I have done differently). Some reflection strategies could include journaling, talking with a partner, taking a “mental trip”, creating a visual of your ideas, creating a rap or skit, etc. Any learning activity, even inclusion activities, should include at least one reflection question.
9. **Appreciations** – giving our learners the opportunity to express their appreciation is an important element to build a sense of community. This can be done by structuring it at the end of an activity (I liked it when....., It helped me when....., Thank you for noticing....., etc.) and eventually just opening it up to any appreciations. When a group has been working together on a project, provide time for them to give appreciations to each other – in the small group or to share with the class. This may feel uncomfortable in the beginning and you will need to give yourself a reminder but soon it will just become part of what your learners do – you'll know that you have built a community when appreciations become spontaneous.
10. All of the above mentioned points are part of the **Tribes** process – and obviously are things that any interested teacher can incorporate into their practice. The Tribes training gives you the opportunity to have a better understanding of the process and to *experience* numerous Tribes cooperative learning strategies, energizers and reflection activities. Jackie Schoening is the certified Tribes trainer in the CESA 6 region, Chris Kleiman is the certified Tribes trainer in the CESA 7 region. Tribes trainings are offered throughout the year, contact either Jackie or Chris for more information. Additionally, there are certified Tribes trainers at the following CESAs: CESA 2,3,4,5,6,7 as well as in many districts throughout the state.
11. For more information on Tribes, check out the national Tribes website at [www.tribes.com](http://www.tribes.com).